



Office of Mayor Ted Wheeler
City of Portland

STATE OF THE CITY
2019

APRIL 29, 2019

[SPEECH BEGINS]

In the late 1980s, I was a business grad student in NYC. Back then I was taking finance and management classes. So, I needed a different class to balance out the type of classes I was taking.

After looking at the list of courses, I found what I thought would be the perfect candidate. It was a relatively new course being offered in a relatively new field back then. Nonprofit management.

The purpose of the course was to apply the basic principles of business to solving complex social issues. It seemed interesting. But more importantly at the time, it seemed easy. So, I signed up.

A requirement of the course was to pick a social problem and offer solutions. I decided I wanted to study homelessness.

It was of interest to me because every single day I passed dozens of men and women, mostly young men, huddled to keep warm on the ground over HVAC exhaust grates that surrounded the entire perimeter of the school.

It bothered me that just outside the gates of one of the wealthiest universities in the world, these men and women were just hanging on to keep warm. I wondered what, if anything, could be done to help.

So I started spending time with people experiencing homelessness. I sat with them. I listened to their stories. Many were open with me about who they were and why they were there.

They told me about petty transgressions with the law that permanently disqualified them from jobs and from housing.

They told me stories of addiction and living with untreated mental health issues. They told me about racism, the worst of which was perpetuated by government institutions that were supposed to help lift them.

They told me about the physical trauma they experienced living on the streets of Manhattan. And they told me about families scattered and lost - about people who had once loved them but who had now forgotten them.

They told me, with unrestrained bitterness, about people in power looking the other way.

More than anything else, they told me what it was like to feel invisible, ignored, looked through.

I was reminded how many times I had walked past them myself, with barely a glance. I still remember the shame I felt at that recognition.

Why do I tell you this story?

Because that class inadvertently changed the trajectory of my life — and I realized that thread of humanity, is woven in me, it's woven around you, and it's woven around us.

We are all bound by these universal needs of wanting to be seen, to be loved, to have a purpose. To have hope for a better future and a bedrock faith that we will find a way to get there together.

I had inherited this burden of knowledge, and the course of my life since that time has been focused on using that knowledge for a greater purpose.

You understand, or you wouldn't be here today invested in the State of our City. The City of Portland.

After I received my MBA, I was offered good jobs. I turned them down.

My professors, my friends, my family were confused and disappointed.

But I wasn't.

I knew that I could be successful on Wall Street, but I also knew that the work would ultimately be unfulfilling, and that the most important work in my life would be dedicated to solving larger societal problems using the skills and gifts I was given.

So I did a 180 and went to the JFK School of Government to gain a deeper understanding of how I could be of help.

I am here because like you, Portland is my home.

It's the city I love. It's the city I was born in. It's the city I'll die in.

I will make sure that Portland lives up to its full potential for all of us.

Which brings me to my values.

I believe in fairness. I believe in justice. I believe that how we treat the most vulnerable among us, defines who we are.

I believe that prosperity should be shared by everyone in the community.

I believe that diversity is a strength and that immigration is an advantage.

I believe that, ultimately, we all want the same things for ourselves and our families and our community.

I believe that there is no problem that we cannot solve if we stick together, if we have each other's backs, if we bring together the best of our collective courage and wisdom and that I have a role to play in making Portland a city that can show the nation that we can be hopeful, that we can show results, and that we can thrive together, even in uncertain times.

That's what I believe. And that's why I'm here.

It's equally important to note that I'm not here doing the work alone. I am part of a City Council: Commissioners Fish, Hardesty, Fritz, and Eudaly – we are doing great work, together. Each brings a unique perspective, skills, and lived experiences to the task.

We don't always agree, but more often than not we do, and we have all committed the best years of our lives to the City we love.

I know that things aren't easy right now. We live in a time of confusion, anxiety and fear. Our community is undergoing breathtaking change – the pace of which can often feel jarring.

TOPIC: HOMELESSNESS + HOUSING

We are no longer a small city. We are now a big city and with that comes big city problems.

Portland, this is a pivotal moment — and the actions we take will sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

The clearest example of this is how we address the humanitarian crisis unfolding on our streets – the homelessness crisis.

At a time when Portland is exploding with development, at a time when our economy is strong, some people are falling deeper into poverty.

FACT. The homelessness crisis we are seeing on our streets today is the cumulative result of multiple system failures.

It's the direct result of decades of inadequate housing investment, continued federal disinvestment, a failure to create pathways for low-income individuals to enter and fully participate in our increasingly skills-based economy, and our on-going policies around criminal justice.

These are daunting issues before us, but I don't tell you this to overwhelm you. I tell you this to underscore the urgency with which we are responding to this crisis and to assure you that we are on the right path.

To begin with, we are not doing this alone. We have a massive community of selfless, tireless people in our government, our neighborhood associations, our non-profit sectors, and in business who are all working strategically together to make progress on this issue.

The partnership we have with Multnomah County – through the Joint Office of Homeless Services and the A Home for Everyone collaborative is an unprecedented, nationally recognized, effective model of coordination and partnership across sectors and jurisdictions.

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Other communities from around the nation have looked to Portland to learn from this coordinated approach to increase housing opportunities through strategic investments.

This is what it's all about.

Partnership, Innovation, Progress.

I know you get it.

I know this – because you stepped forward to pass two substantial housing bonds – first at the city level and then again at the regional level – to transform our housing infrastructure so that everyone has the chance to live in safe, stable housing, in neighborhoods that connect us to opportunity and to community.

When it passed in 2016, Portland's Housing Bond was the largest general obligation bond in the city's history and the first-ever bond measure to support affordable housing development. Just think about that for a moment.

The Bond aimed to create 1,300 units of affordable housing over seven years, with a focus on families and extremely-low income households. And in just the first two years, we are already more than halfway to delivering on that promise. We're moving quickly, efficiently, and with urgency.

Right now, at this very moment it's making an impact in the lives of Portland families. Six projects have been identified to date, totaling more than 660 units of permanently affordable housing either completed or in progress throughout the city.

Research has shown time and time again, supportive housing is the best housing solution for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness. It also reduces costs associated with crisis services such as shelters, jails, and hospitals, which often grow when vulnerable people are left to cycle through our institutions without a housing solution.

Recently we added more than 600 units of supportive housing – either already open or in progress now.

That means more people like Tomas and Camila (whose names we've changed for their privacy) can get the stability they need to face life's trials.

Tomas was sick with cancer.

Community health workers referred Tomas and Camila to a mobile supportive housing team run by JOIN – one of the nonprofits we fund – to provide housing services for people who are homeless.

Before, the couple's only shelter was a moldy garage and they were on the brink of reaching our streets.

So JOIN got to work.

They found doctors who spoke Spanish.

They connected the couple with a counselor, a hospice nurse, and a health advocate.

JOIN then helped them reconnect with their family.

THEN, they helped the couple find an affordable one-bedroom apartment.

This apartment was possible because of the housing bond you approved three years ago.

This isn't unique to Tomas and Camila. When we tell you the city helps thousands of people – this is how we're helping them.

That is where your money is going: programs, services, and housing that lifts those who need it most up and into stability.

And there's more good news. Last year was a record year for housing production at the Portland Housing Bureau with more than 800 affordable units coming online in the last year and we're slated to do even better this year, with more than 1,000 affordable units anticipated to open their doors in 2019. That translates to affordable housing for 1,800 more Portlanders.

I'd like you to really take in some of these statistics for a moment.

We moved more than 6000 people out of homeless and into housing last year

We prevented nearly 7,500 people from becoming homeless.

We doubled our shelter capacity and redesigned how we provide shelter so that it

It is often more effective to move people out of shelters and into permanent housing than going through the lengthy and often contentious process of opening new shelters.

That's why this is our focus.

But again, we didn't do this alone.

Our non-profit partners stepped up and continue to step up — partners like REACH CDC, Do Good Multnomah, Central City Concern, Native American Rehabilitation Association, and many others to open affordable housing developments throughout our community.

Just a few days ago, I joined Rose CDC, APANO, and others — to celebrate the opening of Orchards of 82nd — an affordable housing building ushering in a new focus on equitable development along the Division Transit Corridor. This, along with other developments, are all a part of revitalizing East Portland.

Our business partners are also stepping up — some working on a badly needed navigation model with Transition Projects to connect people to services that will get them off the streets. This is an especially effective model for people experiencing chronic homelessness.

Our faith communities are stepping up like Imago Dei who donated their facilities for emergency shelter during this winter. And like St. Mark's Lutheran Church, whose parking lot is being developed into a City and County funded pilot project that will house underserved homeless veterans in our community.

You are all stepping up too. So much of what we've been able to accomplish for Portlanders is because, time and time again, you stood up for affordable housing at the ballot box and entrusted us with substantial new resources through two housing bonds.

You also voted to amend the State Constitution last November so that we have new flexibility to make our Bond dollars go further through public-private partnerships and by leveraging additional sources of funding in the development of Bond projects.

I am pleased to announce that we are taking immediate action to capitalize on this opportunity. Tomorrow, the Portland Housing Bureau will release the Bond Opportunity Solicitation, the first solicitation to utilize this new legal authority.

This Solicitation makes \$70M in Bond funding available for new construction projects, property acquisition, and the rehabilitation of existing buildings for permanently affordable housing.

In total, we expect this funding opportunity to produce up to 600 new units of affordable housing.

This is how we lay the foundation for real, lasting change together: through partnership, innovation, and leadership — and by marshaling our collective courage to re-imagine our future!

There's still much more to do.

It is unacceptable that in 2019, a person's race continues to determine their earning potential, their economic opportunities, or whether they can realize the dream of owning a home. As we address the housing crisis, we must recognize the role that systemic discrimination in government policies and business practices has played in limiting economic and housing opportunity for communities of color.

That is why, beyond producing housing units, we are leveraging our partnerships with culturally specific agencies to better serve Communities of color and immigrant and refugee populations, who have been disproportionately impacted by the housing shortage and who face steeper barriers to housing access.

That's why we're dedicating resources to culturally specific homebuyer counseling and education - to assist more families from communities of color in becoming first-time homeowners.

And through the N/NE Neighborhood Housing Strategy, we are confronting our own culpability in the lasting harm that was done to the historic communities of North and Northeast Portland – and most acutely to African Americans in the name of progress and urban renewal.

The City has now funded more than 500 new units of affordable rental housing through the N/NE initiative, giving priority to those families who were most profoundly impacted and displaced by previous urban renewal efforts.

That's why I am so proud of the work we've been doing to build affordable housing.

This is what you elected me to do. To undo generations of harm to marginalized communities; and to prioritize where dollars will have the greatest impact.

Thanks to the city and our partners, we helped 35,000 people stay in housing, return to housing, find shelter, get access to services, and find jobs last fiscal year.

35,000 people! That is no small number. And that is something to be proud of.

Now we know we have a long way to go before we see this crisis turn around.

We know that there are still significant challenges ahead of us and we know the problem could SEEM like it's getting worse before it gets better.

But because of everything you just heard me say, we're not giving up. We're here. We're determined. We're ready. And we're unified.

TOPIC: PPB

Let's talk about our Portland Police Bureau. Because we need to have a candid conversation about our police.

Let's begin by distinguishing the truths from the untruths.

Fact. Officers are tasked with a job that is difficult, frequently thankless, and often dangerous. They risk their lives to serve and protect our community from harm. They also serve to protect our rights.

Fact. We are at a critical time in our bureau. Calls for service are increasing, but staffing is decreasing because of high levels of retirements and difficulties in recruitment given the competitive job market, just two of many reasons.

Fact. Since becoming Mayor, I have met many selfless, honorable, and giving officers and I strongly support them in their work.

But it's also important to acknowledge that the role of police is evolving and it needs to reflect the needs of an evolving community.

As Police Commissioner, my job is to recognize the bureau's good work – but also hold it accountable to the public it serves.

That's why I've tasked the Chief to make sure we serve our diverse community equally and fairly.

I know the majority understands that when it comes to matters of policing, there's very little that's clear cut. I know the majority understands that our officers serve you every day, often thanklessly.

Officers like Bill Ollenbrook of North Precinct . He's a trained crisis negotiator – and talked a 20-year-old man off the top spire of the St. John's bridge who had every intention of jumping some 2000 feet. When he first arrived – he made a human connection with this man – found common ground with him. The conversation turned into one of finding hope and finding a reason to live. That conversation convinced the young man to come down safely. Officer Ollenbrook was able to do this with the help of Officer Hern and Sgt. Abrahamson too.

This is the kind of work our officers do, every single day, often without praise or public acknowledgement.

Now in a city of more than 600,000 people, I know many of you understand this and are largely supportive of our police – but there are still some who fear them. I understand that as well and that's something I'm determined to change.

So what is being done to address to real concerns of bias for example, in our police bureau?

The answer is: A lot.

Thanks to the leadership of Chief Outlaw, we are making significant progress.

She brought in procedural justice training and implicit bias training.

Police Officer Use of Force is down across the board.

PPB also beefed up the equity team, significantly increased transparency, and transitioned from the gang enforcement team to the gun violence reduction team, we added resources to this effort and shifted the team's emphasis to gun violence.

We also beefed up the Behavioral Health Unit and funding for the Service Coordination Team so that we could better address the needs of those in crisis on our streets.

We also made crime reports for victims free.

You asked for more police accountability. So we created PCCEP (Portland Committee on Community-Engaged Policing) it's where the bureau and community members sit at the same table to both engage with and hold the Portland Police Bureau and me accountable for policy decisions.

You asked for a homeless community liaison in the bureau? We created the position and we're close to announcing our hire.

You asked for us to find a model where armed officers don't always have to respond to non-emergency calls for service? So we created PS3's (Public Safety Support Specialists).

You also asked for us to look at different models where service providers and mental health experts can respond to calls for service involving people experiencing homelessness instead of armed officers? I'm 100% on board and will be announcing soon the first steps we will take to make this a reality.

These actions are unprecedented for the city. And it takes unprecedented action because we are living in unprecedented times.

TOPIC: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Portland is experiencing GENERATIONALLY low unemployment. We've all seen the economic prosperity of the last few years. The data on low unemployment numbers. This is all of course great, but we still know many of our neighbors are still struggling. This increase in wealth has not been shared equitably.

Communities of color – especially African American and Native American communities - are not experiencing the benefits of that growth.

The scale of economic opportunity is out of balance.

It's easy to acknowledge such a crisis. It's harder to solve it.

The growing divide prompted me to reach out to a wide array of advisors, business owners and organizational leaders to figure out how we could collectively capitalize on the healthy economy and intentionally foster more broadly shared economic opportunity.

So what are we doing?

We're helping women and people of color strengthen and scale their companies.

We're incentivizing companies to create more middle-wage jobs and increase access to workforce training programs.

We're creating more access to startup capital for minority entrepreneurs.

And with the help of my Council of Economic Advisors, we want to take this work to scale. With an unprecedented coalition of more than a dozen business and multicultural organizations, we have launched Portland Means Progress, a new initiative to ensure Portland remains one of America's most vibrant cities.

Portland Means Progress will enable local companies with 3 to 23,000 employees to grow AND to help Portland grow more equitably by:

Creating internship and job opportunities for underrepresented youth;

Increase purchasing from diverse businesses; and

Changing their cultures to be more inclusive.

We couldn't do this without our partner organizations that have helped us launch this important initiative

I think we can all agree - the scale of economic opportunity has been imbalanced for far too long and this is how we are changing that.

We don't just believe in creating jobs – we believe in creating a city where economic prosperity is shared by ALL.

For many of you - you chose to live in Portland because you are deeply invested in building your future here. It's sometimes not easy to see the progress being made so allow me a few moments to share some positive results.

A few months ago, I pledged that Portland will one day become the cleanest city in America, this was because I was concerned by the amount of trash we were seeing in our Parks, along our waterways, and public thoroughfares.

Well since the summer of last year, we've collected over 2.5 million lbs of litter from all across the city.

And because you wanted to help – in partnership with SOLVE, we created Keep it Pretty Rose City – to get all Portlanders the opportunity to help clean the city and we’ve seen remarkable results.

We’ve also invested records numbers in shelter bed creation, connection to services, and housing to help alleviate the humanitarian crisis unfolding on our streets.

We’re looking to the future by exploring 5G technology. This will enable much more advanced internet connections and will allow government to serve the public better.

And at a critical time for our environment – we continue to lead the nation with the implementation of a comprehensive strategy to address the issues posed by climate change through our Climate Action Plan.

We also took a strong stance as a council to reduce waste and its impact on the environment by passing legislation limiting single-use plastics like straws and plastic utensils.

We also committed the City of Portland to transitioning to community-wide 100% renewable energy by the year 2050. We’re working hard within our bureaus to develop and implement strategies to reach this goal.

I understand your fears.

I understand that we are living in a time of uncertainty, anxiety and fear. An increasing sense that the politics of this nation have gone off the rails.

The moral centering of this country has been in jeopardy following relentless attacks against our values. These include attacks against the immigrant community, ambivalence towards common sense gun legislation, and a lack of urgent commitment to addressing global climate change – just to name a few.

For at least the next two years, I don’t expect the situation to change in Washington DC, so this is WHY the role of cities have never been more critical.

Cities like Portland, are leading the way on the biggest issues of our time.

This is why I’m so thankful for the work of our incredible city commissioners.

Thanks to Commissioner Fritz’s leadership, five new parks have opened, just since I became Mayor. Gateway Discovery Park in particular is a gem that creates a focal point in East Portland.

Commissioner Fish. He’s a stalwart champion for the neediest people in our

community; I was proud to work with him to set an ambitious supportive housing goal of 2,000 new homes over 10 years – and am pleased to report that we're ahead of schedule.

Commissioner Hardesty with her deep commitment to social justice and the environment. Because of her work on the Clean Energy Fund we will be able to fast track our just transition goals – associated with our 100% renewable energy pledge.

Commissioner Eudaly with her work reaffirming Portland's status as a sanctuary city. She was responsible for convening a community-based taskforce to identify the highest priorities for immigrant and refugee communities.

I am also so thankful for all our public and private partners spread out through every corner of the city and the state.

Like our 30,000+ veterans who by living their value of service, honor, and strength, inspire the rest of us. Thank you for your unending service.

Like our LGBTQ community, especially the transgender community, who by living their truth every single day inspire others to do so. We see you, we hear you, we love you.

I know I'm missing many people here, but I'm sure you don't want me speaking for another few days because that's how long our list of partnerships run.

Portland. We are not going anywhere. We will be in the trenches for you every single day to make sure we build a Portland that is welcome and prosperous for all.

Just think about where we are standing here today. In this iconic space.

You might be wondering why we chose to hold the State of the City at the Veteran's Memorial Coliseum.

That's because for me, this building represents Portland's storied past. Just through those doors, it's where the Trailblazers won that incredible 1977 NBA championship.

In the same space it's where leaders like President Obama, the Dalai Lama spoke to thousands.

One can ONLY imagine what the future will bring. To me this building doesn't only connect us to our past, but it reminds of the opportunities that we will experience together in the future. Because like us, the Coliseum is also in transition.

I want to bring my remarks today to a close by bringing back the story I shared with you in the beginning.

I often think back to the men and women that I met on the streets of New York three decades ago. I wonder where they are now? Did they reconnect with their families? Did they overcome challenges? Did they find the help they needed? Are they even still alive?

I know I owe them a debt of gratitude. If they weren't there fighting their own battles, I wouldn't be here fighting our battles now, together.

I want to say this. Being Mayor, is not easy. I was never under the illusion it would be.

But is by far the most meaningful work of my life. This is my life's work. This is my purpose.

The challenges are many, and the resources often seem limited given the magnitude of the task. But there is no more important calling to me than service to our community.

So that's why I'm here. That's why I've asked my spouse and my daughter to join me on this journey for better or for worse.

What motivates me and keeps me focused and gives me optimism is that I know I'm not in this alone.

I have a dedicated City Council. I have more than 6000 outstanding public servants working alongside me at the city of Portland.

And I have an entire community working together, to solve our problems together, to lay the foundations of a city that will serve as a beacon of shared prosperity, inclusion, and hope for generations to come.

Thank you for the honor of allowing me to serve.